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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 FREETOWN 000099

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER/ESPRUILL)

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM SL

SUBJECT: FREETOWN UNDER FIRE: POLITICAL VIOLENCE CREATES CHAOS IN THE CAPITAL

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: APC and SLPP members clashed on the evening of March 13, and despite a calmer weekend, Freetown erupted with violence on March 16 as political battles continue to be waged. Party events on March 13 led to SLPP Headquarters being stoned, and several vehicles owned by SLPP leadership burned out. Tempers calmed over the weekend, but flared again on March 16, and the SLPP headquarters once again allegedly came under fire by a mob of APC supporters. Sierra Leone Police (SLP) officers deployed to control the scene used tear gas and may have fired live ammunition. The downtown area is now cordoned off, with many businesses and government buildings closed. Ambassador met with SLPP leadership on March 16 to discuss their concerns, and has communicated with other members of the diplomatic corps. The UN Executive Representative of the Secretary General is hosting a meeting on March 17 with Chiefs of Mission to discuss the situation and possibly begin mediation between the parties. End Summary.

MARCH 13 EVENTS

¶2. (SBU) On March 13, the mayor of the Freetown City Council (FCC) unveiled a newly refurbished clock tower in the city's east side. The FCC is almost exclusively APC, and crowds of party supporters attended the unveiling and then followed the mayor back to his office, which is adjacent to the SLPP headquarters. The crowd allegedly chanted anti-SLPP songs and threw rocks at SLPP supporters standing around the party headquarters. These supporters allegedly responded by pelting stones at the crowd, escalating the violent clashes between them. Some reports indicate that several people were injured in the melee, and the two vehicles parked in the SLPP compound were torched. During the clashes, the SLPP radio station repeatedly announced that their headquarters were under attack, essentially urging supporters to join the crowds and come to their aid. The radio station claimed that two people were killed (Note: This is unsubstantiated, and have not been repeated. End note). SLPP supporters allege that the SLP did nothing to stop the attacks and even provoked the crowds to further violence. On March 16 the Minister of Information, APC member I.B. Kargbo alleged that SLPP Secretary General J.J. Saffa used the radio station to call on the military to intervene, since, in his view, the SLP were not doing their jobs.

¶3. (C) Emboffs visited the SLPP headquarters site on March 14, at the behest of Party Chairman John Benjamin. The damage to the building had not been exaggerated: many windows had been shattered by stones, and the husks of the vehicles remained in the compound yard. Windows in some nearby buildings had also been broken. Information shared by SLP and the UN may indicate that the SLPP were not merely bystanders in the evening's events, however; the SLP have intelligence suggesting that SLPP supporters heckled the APC members at the mayor's office, and then threw petrol bombs at the crowd

outside the headquarters, igniting their own vehicles in the process. SLP told a high-ranking UN advisor that they did as much as they could to contain and stop the altercation, with 35 officers injured in the process, and that arrests were not effected because their efforts were solely focused on stopping the fracas. SLP allege that they have intelligence suggesting that SLPP members, including high-ranking officials, actually planned the event to discredit and destabilize the APC government.

MARCH 14: PARTY RADIO SUSPENDED

¶4. (U) On March 14, Vice President Sam Sumana, standing in for a traveling President Koroma, used executive powers to suspend the APC and SLPP radio stations. He stated that the suspension would last until Koroma returned from his trip to India and addressed the situation (Note: Koroma returned to Sierra Leone the night of March 15. End note), and further said that the government will not tolerate any form of violence in the country. The Information Minister supported the Vice President's decision on March 16, saying that it was a governance decision to restore peace and tranquillity to the nation, rather than a politically-motivated one. The minister went on to say that the suspension is only temporary, that a full investigation into the events of March 13 will be undertaken immediately, and that those responsible for the violence will face justice.

¶5. (U) Though party radio stations are often careful not to be gratuitously inciteful, they do call on their respective

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supporters to assist when clashes occur, worsening already tense situations. The Vice President thus suspended the stations out of fear that they would be used to instigate further incidents. However, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists condemned the ban, saying that it is "an attempt to suppress press freedom," and called for an immediate and unconditional lifting of the suspension. The Independent Media Commission, the independent parastatal that registers media outlets, monitors freedom of the press, mediates complaints, and investigates actions taken by or against journalists that are controversial or unlawful, allegedly informed the Vice President that only they have the power to suspend the stations. The Vice President countered that he used constitutional authority as acting Head of State in light of security concerns. As of March 16, the stations continue to be off the air, though the parties are using other stations to reach their constituents.

MARCH 16: SITUATION WORSENS, BUT CONTAINED

¶6. (U) On March 16, violence erupted again at the SLPP Headquarters during the morning rush hour. The building was allegedly vandalized by an unidentified group believed to be APC supporters. SLPP leadership allege that the SLP guard, which has been protecting the perimeter of the SLPP headquarters compound since March 13, allowed looters to enter the building. These looters set fires in various locations, attacked SLPP party members, raped seven women, and destroyed office equipment. The SLPP Secretary General gave a radio interview in the morning, asking all SLPP supporters to defend the party against the attack, and claiming that the SLP had failed to fulfill their constitutional responsibility.

¶7. (C) Reports from various contacts indicate that the looting and vandalism did take place, with SLP officers finally regaining control of the building around 1400 hours. The SLP used tear gas to disperse the crowd, and contacts reported mobs of people running from the gas throughout the downtown streets. Contacts also reported shots being fired,

though emboffs have yet to confirm how and where this took place. With most of downtown cordoned off by a police blockade, and businesses and offices closed, the heart of Freetown is quiet as of 1730. Whether this calm will remain overnight and into March 17 is unknown, particularly if the blockades are lifted. It is currently unclear if tomorrow will be "business as usual," and some contacts have said that they will not re-open their businesses until the President issues a statement and mediation between the parties begins.

EMBASSY RESPONDS

¶ 8. (C) Ambassador met with Foreign Minister Zainab Bangura on March 16, and indicated her concern about the situation and reiterated the need for unity between the majority and opposition parties. Bangura responded that the problems are being instigated by SLPP "thugs," but that she strongly believes that Sierra Leone is one country and must be governed as such. She also stated that the radio stations are conduits for parties to insult one another, and that the opposition should focus on the 2012 elections rather than verbally attacking ministers and other members of government. Ambassador stated the importance of having independent, politically-neutral radio stations, especially in a country known for its commitment to human rights and democracy. Bangura ended her comments by saying that APC supporters want the President to take SLPP members to task for their perceived disinterest in unity, and made an oblique reference to the fact that they could take matters into their own hands.

¶ 8. (C) Also on March 16, Ambassador met with SLPP party leaders, including Benjamin, Saffa, and Regional SLPP Chairman for the Eastern District, Ambassador Foyah. The leaders placed the blame for the various incidents on APC members and leaders, as well as saying that the SLP had deliberately been derelict in their duties. They also stated that the Vice President had been their primary government interlocutor, but that his orders to the SLP to control the violence had been ignored. They claimed that they had been aware of the potential for the March 16 attack the previous day, reported it to the SLP chain of command, but still had minimal assistance. They warned the Ambassador that, though violence is not their party's policy, various factions across Sierra Leone could take retaliatory action. Saffa stated that SLPP Members of Parliament are threatening to withdraw from government, and that they will no longer attempt to interface

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with government and APC leaders without the presence of an international mediator. Benjamin told Ambassador that they are appealing to the international community, as guarantors of Sierra Leonean peace, to address this situation.

¶ 9. (C) Ambassador responded that Sierra Leone is a model in the region as a peaceful, stable democracy. She warned against a descent into violence and a withdrawal from democratic institutions, saying that governments must strive for unity for the good of their nations. Reminding them of the poor conditions in Guinea as a result of their recent coup, she said that a similar occurrence here could lead to a suspension of good-willed donor support. She let the SLPP contingent know that she had spoken with the Foreign Minister about the March 13 incident, and that she would follow-up with the UN Executive Representative of the Secretary General. She advised that an international group could mediate the parties' dispute, and the SLPP representatives agreed that this would be welcome (Note: The UN is hosting a meeting of COMs and party leaders on March 17. End note).

COMMENT

¶ 10. (C) Sierra Leonean party politics is rife with vitriolic

rhetoric and finger-pointing. Emboffs observed the damage at SLPP headquarters, but it is unlikely that the SLPP are wholly innocent victims in this latest round of party clashes. Though one cannot condone the vandalism and alleged violence against the SLPP, there is a strong likelihood that they provoked their rivals. The SLPP are already spinning these attacks against them as propaganda against the APC and their ability to govern, even though the facts of the two incidents and the subsequent government response remain unclear. Though party interactions are frequently negative, this incident represents a serious and significant decline in their relationship. Without international community attention and mediation, this situation threatens to spin dangerously out of control, reducing a peaceful country to its previous, unfortunate state of war. Post issued a warden message to all AmCits, urging them to stay away from political events and be mindful of current tensions. Further septel reports will be provided in the coming days. According to UN sources, President Koroma is slated to address the nation - a move we believe is critical to demonstrate his leadership and ameliorate the current state of affairs. End Comment.

PERRY